

# Homer Entertains

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When you look at a face painted before, say, 1900, you can be fairly certain that you will see a number of standard features positioned in roughly the same spatial relationship to each other. There will be the hair placed judiciously on top, ears on either side, a hooter with nostrils at the end, eyes commodiously positioned under eyebrows (none of this applies to post-1900 painting, of course, where the artist probably spends months examining his inmost being to decide how many ears to provide and where exactly to locate them for maximum creative effect). But every face is not the same because, within these natural limits, the artist has all the flexibility he requires. A poet like Homer, working within an oral tradition of extempore *recreation* of traditional tales in hexameter verse, builds scenes in rather the same way. The *Iliad*, for instance, has a great number of battle scenes, which can be analysed down to a few basic types and a great number of minor variations in detail. One of the most common scenes in the *Odyssey* is the arrival, welcoming and entertaining of a guest or stranger (*xenia* is the technical term for such scenes). Its most frequent fixed elements are as follows:

1. the person goes,
2. arrives,
3. finds a person/situation (often bystanders are described too),
4. is seen,
5. is met;
6. the host gets angry at the treatment of the guest;
7. the hand is taken;
8. the guest is greeted (food is often offered at this point),
9. is led in (his gear is often taken here; sometimes he admires the home, sometimes he is offered a bath),
10. is seated (a libation may be poured),
11. food is prepared and consumed;
12. the guest is questioned about his identity and the purpose of his visit.

## A goddess calls on Telemachus

This sort of 'plan' is obviously very useful for an oral poet. It gives him a framework within which to compose. He does not need to worry about the general direction of the scene and can concentrate all his energies upon the details. There is a good example right at the beginning of the *Odyssey*. In 1.96ff, Athene prepares to visit the palace of Odysseus. Odysseus has been away for nearly twenty years. His palace is awash with 108 suitors seeking Penelope's hand in marriage, and eating her out of house and home. Only Telemachus, Odysseus' young son, is there to protect his mother. Observe now the skill with which Homer decorates the commonplace scene of arrival and welcome to emphasise the

situation in the palace (fixed elements are numbered as above; the number in brackets is the line number of the Oxford text):

1. (102) Athene goes;
2. (103) she arrives 'at the doors of Odysseus' (delightful irony, since he has not been home for twenty years. But a constant motif of *Odyssey* 1 is the recollection of Odysseus by the characters what he was like and what he would be like should he return. His memory haunts the book);
3. (106) she finds – the suitors, playing. This is a neat shock. Her mission was to Telemachus (88) and the fact that she sees first of all the suitors emphasises their dominance of the household in the absence of its rightful lord. The scene then opens up, and at 109-12 we observe the general picture: a feast is in preparation, and the young men are about to down their martinis. Element 3 establishes a key theme of the *Odyssey* – the wilful, calculated dissipation by the suitors of Odysseus' wealth.
4. (113) Telemachus sees her. As usual in Homer, a character is described the first time that he is met. It is significant that the first time we meet Telemachus he is thinking about the return of Odysseus.
5. (119) Telemachus goes to meet the guest;
6. (119-20) he is angry at the way the guest has been ignored by the suitors. Here is another motif of the *Odyssey*. There is a *right way* to behave. There are ceremonies of peacetime (as there are of the battle-field in the *Iliad*), which give certainty and reassurance in a fluid world. These basic conventions are wholly ignored by the suitors.
7. (121) Telemachus takes Athene's hand;
8. (123) he offers greetings and food (and observe how he stresses that a guest should first be fed, and only then questioned. Young though he is, he knows the right way to do things, unlike the suitors).
9. (125) Athene is led in and her spear taken from her. Observe the exquisite nostalgia of these lines – the spear is placed 'where there were other spears of patient-hearted Odysseus standing in numbers'.
10. (130) She is seated, but apart from the suitors, because of their disgusting manners and because Telemachus wants to ask her if she has news of Odysseus;
11. (136) food is prepared and consumed;
12. (170) the questions begin. Now the structure of this scene is wholly typical, but even this brief summary underlines the extraordinary skill with which the poet has coloured the details to point up the major motifs of the opening books.

### **Nestor's Palace**

The other arrivals in the *Odyssey* show similar skill. In *Odyssey* 3.4ff, Telemachus and Athene are on their way to visit Nestor. Telemachus' purpose is to gain *kleos* ('glory, reputation') and to establish whether Odysseus is alive or dead. So:

1. they go – already described at the end of Book 2;

2. (4) they arrive at Pylos. There now follows a digression, in which Telemachus expresses his fears about the impending meeting. Nestor is one of Greece's most revered heroes, so old that every birthday brings a telegram from the Queen. Telemachus feels he is not up to the test, but Athene reassures him and takes control. The youthful inexperience (but potential) of Telemachus is an important motif of the *Odyssey* and is cleverly highlighted here, immediately before Telemachus' meeting with the great Nestor. Now this digression does not end till line 31, but Homer does not lose his way in the scene. Line 31 virtually repeats l.4 (the arrival at Pylos), so the poet has coolly brought himself back to the point at which the digression began. This technique is called 'ring-composition', an invaluable means for the poet to get himself back on the track again and very common for instance with similes.
3. (32) Nestor is seated there; his sons surround him, preparing a feast.
4. (34) They see Telemachus and Athene . . . then something like chaos ensues. We are expecting 5 meeting, 7 hand taken, 8 greeting and offer of food, 9 leading in, 10 seating. What we get in lines 34-9 is 'they all came down together (5), with their hands (7) gave them greeting (8) and offered them places (10). First Peisistratos, son of Nestor, came close up to them (5) and took them both by the hands (7) and seated them at the feasting (10). We might be tempted to conclude that Homer can't tell his meeting from his greeting from his seating from his eating, but surely the reason for the hurly-burly is that it indicates the overpowering warmth of the hospitality on offer. This makes an excellent start to Telemachus' mission and a significant contrast with the suitors' behaviour in Book 1. There follows a libation (40-64), a flexible element which can be inserted anywhere, but observe that it is poured to Poseidon, the god who has delayed Odysseus' return; and then:
  11. (65-7) food is taken and consumed,
  12. (69ff) any questions.

## A Homeric wedding

At Book 4.1ff, Telemachus and his new friend Peisistratos, son of Nestor, visit Menelaus.

1. They go (end of Book 3);
2. (2) and arrive in Sparta;
3. (3) they find Menelaus celebrating a marriage feast (digression, ended by ring-composition at lines 15-21).
4. (23) Eteoneus sees them, and at once asks Menelaus what to do;
6. (30) Menelaus goes the colour of an enraged beetroot and tells him to bring them in;
9. (43) the horses are taken, and the two are led in (admiring the palace and being offered a bath, both flexible elements);
10. (51) they are seated;
11. (52) food is offered;
8. (60) Menelaus offers greetings and food ;
12. (61) Menelaus promises to question them later (it turns out to be much later, in fact).

We observe at once the absence of elements 5 and 7 and the displacement of 8, though apart from this the scene follows its normal pattern. Why the dislocation? The answer is surely connected with the ceremony which Telemachus is interrupting. Presumably Eteoneus doesn't ask them in at once for fear the champers will run out on the invited guests; and Menelaus, presumably, only has time to tell him not to be so daft before rushing off to listen aghast to the telegrams. So the greeting cannot be so personal, and 8 can only take place when they are actually seated. The point is that in this household, not even a wedding will stand in the way of the proper civilities.

### **A woman in love?**

Now look at Book 5, where the gods send Hermes to tell the demi-goddess Calypso (who has been ladling love-lorn glances over Odysseus for the last seven years) to release him. And:

1. (50) Hermes goes;
2. (56) he arrives;
3. (58) he finds the nymph at home (the cave is described and Hermes admires it);
4. Calypso recognizes him.

But then Calypso slaps Hermes down in a chair and, without so much as offering him a cocktail sausage,

12. starts giving him the third degree.

This surely cannot be Homeric. The poet has ignored all the intervening niceties of elements 5-8 and then had the temerity to get Calypso playing any questions *before* she had slaughtered the fatted kipper. No wonder Hermes greets it all with an acid silence. Must be some moronic interpolator at work. Well, when you read learned papers saying that sort of thing, you should look for nothing better in them than fish and chips. For here Homer has masterfully depicted a woman in love. True, her love may only be lust in fancy dress, but she knows the jealousy of the gods (line 118) and reacts to Hermes' arrival as one who, in her heart of hearts, *knows* that he has come to take her man away. Who cares about formalities in these circumstances (though she eventually corrects herself rather hurriedly (91) and brings herself to hurl something onto a plate for him)? Homer's perception of her state of mind is exquisitely projected by the way in which she bungles the formal courtesies of *xenia*.

Finally, Book 6. Odysseus has problems. He usually lands on both feet (preferably having landed on someone else's first) but at 127ff he has to advance from his bush and ask some girls for help. Naked, ageing, hirsute, filth-engrined, he is not exactly dressed to kill or, we would think, even seriously endanger anyone who approaches him. But to the girls, he looks like a lion and off they run, just like mummy told them: except Nausicaa. Odysseus, born with a silver cliché in his mouth, speaks a cunning word to her. It works, in a speech which repays close study by anyone likely to find himself for whatever reason stranded naked one morning under a bush in the Girls' High School playing fields (or vice versa, so as not to be

sexist). What happens next is Homer at his best. Nausicaa goes into a full xenia sequence, offering this filthy nude (of all people) a bath (of all things) on a beach (of all places), to be followed by food and some beautifully disguised questions (276ff). Why does Nausicaa go into this sequence in this somewhat unlikely setting? That I leave you to find out for yourself, and also to trace further examples of xenia elements in the episode. And then why not turn to the Cyclops episode in Odyssey 9?

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